

Kansas Preservation

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Early Twentieth Century Courthouses

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Historic Courthouses

Study Examines Kansas' Second- and Third- Generation County Courthouses

Thirteen twentieth-century Kansas county courthouses were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in April 2002. As a group, they are significant for their associations with the second- and third-generation courthouses erected in a wave of new courthouse construction that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, nearly half of the state's county courthouses date to the period between 1900 and 1930 and second- and third-generation courthouses comprise a majority of the state's surviving historic courthouses.¹

Kansas' historic county courthouses are tangible symbols of the American legal tradition of local self-government and, over their period of use, serve as physical links to important persons and events. Those erected as the county's second or third courthouse are representative of designs and plans for up-to-date fireproof buildings. They replaced obsolete facilities or those destroyed by fire or natural calamity. As such, they reflect a distinct stage in the evolution of the state's county courthouses. Moreover, their common plan and different styles recall distinctive periods in history and the national and regional events that produced different designs.

In Kansas, an agrarian state with a decidedly rural population, the county courthouse served as the center of public life. Its judicial, administrative, and communal roles formed the foundation for the development of an ordered society throughout the state's settlement period and its evolution as a national agricultural center.



Butler County Courthouse, El Dorado

In addition to its functional role, the county courthouse also had an impact by virtue of its substantial physical presence. A cultural icon, the county courthouse was, more often than not, the dominant building in the county seat.

The first county offices and courtrooms were often crowded quarters in the upper stories of commercial buildings or simple frame or log structures. Beginning with their first permanent courthouse, elected officials endeavored to erect a building that projected both a prosperous

image and a conservative but modern outlook. During the courthouse building process, such phrases as "... a safe and sensible building," "... a fine monument of the prosperity of the county ..." and "... up-to-date in all details" were commonplace.²

Architectural Style

The design of Kansas courthouses reflected popular architectural taste and function. Most county commissioners did not understand the aesthetic of the

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Republic County Courthouse, Belleville

Richardsonian Romanesque style or that the courthouse they wanted designed "... along simple, graceful lines entirely absent of any of the 'gingerbread' effects. ..." reflected designs first used in the Renaissance.³ Nor did the fact that they hired academically trained architects mean that they wanted the latest in architectural styling. Financially conservative and traditional in their tastes, county officials usually selected a style similar to other new courthouses rather than establishing an avant-garde approach to their own seat of justice.

Beginning when Kansas became a territory in 1854, the architectural styles used in courthouse construction fall into four distinct stylistic periods. The first era featured a two-story square wood frame or masonry courthouse building with a hip or gable roof.

The second phase in courthouse

architecture began in the 1880s and included masonry courthouses with a high ornamental tower over the central front entrance.

The third period began around 1910 when reinforced concrete and steel construction guaranteed that most new courthouses were completely fireproof. A flat roof with no projections above the firewall line replaced the tower and the hip or gable roof. Most courthouses erected during this period were adaptations of classical styles of architecture, featuring ornamental columns or the arrangement of vertical bays created by windows.

The final stage in courthouse design is in the pre- and post-World War II period and includes buildings executed in the Modern styles as defined by well-proportioned, simple, vertical and horizontal lines. All utilized reinforced concrete or steel frame construction with

stone or brick veneers or concrete exterior surfaces.⁴

The thirteen recently listed courthouses fall into the second and third periods of courthouse design and reflect the three common styles for courthouses erected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: Richardsonian Romanesque, Classical Revival, and Modern.

By far the most popular style for public buildings in the late nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century in Kansas was the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Its solid rusticated stonework, massive proportions, pointed dormers, round arches, towers, and turrets provided an ideal design treatment for the county courthouse as the dominant building in the community.

The style utilized both traditional and new materials in a variety of combinations to create a rich and dramatic effect. Typi-

STYLE	ARCHITECT	DATE	COUNTY	GENERATION
Richardsonian Romanesque	J. C. Holland and Squires	1907-1908	Osborne	Third
Richardsonian Romanesque	George P. Washburn & Sons	1908-1909	Butler	Third
Richardsonian Romanesque	J. C. Holland and Son	1910-1911	Rice	Third
Classical Revival	William Feth	1912	Leavenworth	Second
Classical Revival	Frank C. Squires	1921-1924	Rooks	Second
Classical Revival	Thomas Williamson and Co.	1924-1925	Cheyenne	Second
Classical Revival	Wight and Wight	1925-1927	Wyandotte	Third
Classical Revival	Routledge and Hertz	1927-1928	Comanche	Second
Modern Movement/Art Deco	Smith and English	1929-1930	Grant	Third
Classical Revival	Cuthbert and Suehrk	1886, 1931	Montgomery	Third
Modern Movement/Art Deco	W. E. Glover	1931-1932	Wabaunsee	Second
Modern Movement/Art Deco	Radotinsky & Mertz	1937	Jewell	Third
Modern Movement/Art Deco	Mann & Company	1939-1940	Republic	Third

cal of these juxtapositions was the use of smooth, hard, dark red or dark brown brick with crisp, icy-toned limestone and smoky slate roof tiles. Other techniques utilized both rough-hewn ashlar and polished stone treatments—brownstone, dark granite, and limestone—to enhance visual and tactile appeal.⁵

The name of the style indicates the broad influence of the Boston firm of architect Henry Hobson Richardson and his distinctive Romanesque design idiom. Although the passage of time brought about greater and greater dilution of his style, Richardson's influence lasted at least two decades beyond his death in 1886.⁶

One result of the continued use of the Richardson Romanesque style for courthouses long after it ceased to be used in residential and commercial buildings was the advent of stylistic hybrids that became almost a form of historic eclecticism. Perhaps the most notable examples of this phenomenon in

Kansas are the courthouses designed by two of the state's most prolific courthouse architects, George P. Washburn and J. C. Holland, which combine Classic and/or Colonial Revival features with Richardsonian Romanesque styling.⁷

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a return to classical design idioms occurred in the United States. The exposure of the general public to the Neo-classical style (Classical Revival) and the more elaborate Beaux Arts style at the widely popular Columbian Exposition of 1893 profoundly changed the nature of public architecture and landscape design.

Incorporating the disciplines of architecture, planning, and landscape design, the Beaux Arts Movement was loosely based on classical Greek and Roman architecture as defined and delineated by the academicians of Paris' "Ecole des Beaux-Arts," which trained an entire generation of architects and designers.

While the influence of the Beaux Arts School should not be minimized, it is no

coincidence that the popularity of variations of classical styles had links to the turn-of-the-century social Progressive Movement and also reflected a general conservatism on the part of both architect and client.

One result of these forces was the emergence of monumental, symmetrical, well-appointed public buildings and structures. As applied to the county courthouse, the Neoclassical style reflected various Greco-Roman influences, often including a portico with triangular



Cheyenne County Courthouse, St. Francis

pediment, a cornice with Greek motif providing a horizontal contrast to the vertical emphasis of the columns, and distinct horizontal zones. The Leavenworth and Wyandotte county courthouses reflect this treatment.

The light palette of the designs emanating from the Beaux Arts School was a noticeable departure from the use of contrasting dark and light materials in the late Victorian period. White, cream, and light gray marble, limestone, or cast stone and buff-colored brick came into vogue. Ornamental detail shifted to a wider range of materials such as bronze, steel alloys, copper, and brass.⁸

The end of World War I and a return to prosperity ushered in a wave of new courthouse construction in Kansas. During this period, the classical idiom became more streamlined as courthouses began to grow in size in response to increased economic activity and administrative functions.⁹

The restrained classical references, such as the designs for the Cheyenne and Comanche county courthouses, reflect

the blurring of the City Beautiful Movement and a shift from the idealistic and grandly conspicuous classical interpretation of Roman architecture to a conservative "modern" approach to design. These streamlined buildings still tended to be similar to the self-contained, low, axially arranged civic buildings that capitalized on a grand approach.

In the 1930s private construction of architect-designed buildings essentially ceased due to the economic depression and a prolonged drought. During the

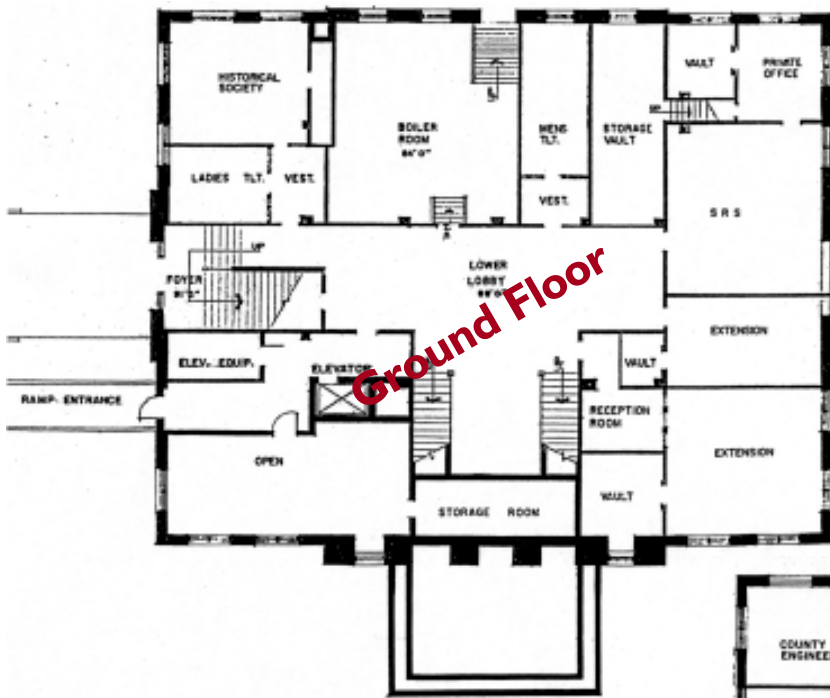
period from 1931 to the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941, only eight Kansas counties erected new courthouses. The design of the courthouses reflects defined stages in the merging of traditional classical forms with streamlined modern design. The courthouses erected in Jewell and Republic counties reflect this transition as well as the influences of the Art Deco style. Both courthouses can be classified as part of the modern movement in American architecture, representing the shift to new accepted

architectural forms. Each courthouse, in its form and arrangement of masses and fenestration, retained classical references in the arrangement of its stylistic elements. Kansas architectural historians aptly term this hybridization as "modern classical eclecticism."¹⁰

During the 1930s the Works Progress Administration (WPA) stimulated the spread of modern architectural styles throughout the country during a period when architects worked almost exclusively on government-funded projects. These simple and cost-efficient designs resulted from the new structural principles based on the use of reinforced concrete and steel frame construction.¹¹

The Courthouse Plan

Whatever their style or even their size, second- and third-generation courthouses seemed imposing. Courthouse architects capitalized on the generous piece of landscaped park set apart from, but adjacent to, the county seat's commercial area. Using a basic plan, usually three or four stories in height and incor-



Erected at a time when a journey to the county seat could consume an entire day, courthouses had special rooms that accommodated travelers' needs.

porating space for the specific functions of county government, the architect added tower, portico, and/or colonnade to give weight and focus to the edifice. Almost always, the design featured an elevated entrance accessed by a grand staircase. Inside, wide halls and grand stairways led to the courtroom, the focal point of the building.¹²

This layout continued in use until after the end of World War II. The ground floor was at grade or slightly below and housed auxiliary functions such as the boiler room, janitor's office, toilets, sitting and meeting rooms, and storage areas. Erected at a time when a journey to the county seat could consume an entire day, courthouses had special rooms that accommodated travelers' needs. The "farmer's assembly room" (men's room) and the ladies rest room, each with their own lavatories, toilet facilities, and sitting rooms, were a fixture in every courthouse erected in the first half of the twentieth century. The Howard County newspaper commented about these amenities in the proposed 1907 Elk County courthouse, "These warm apartments will always be open to those who may have long drives from the outside districts, especially with children." Some suggested that the new Harper County courthouse's ladies rest room have a record player and John Philip Sousa records for the pleasure of the weary. The 1919 Pawnee County courthouse's women's sitting room seated fifty and had upholstered reed furniture.¹³

The first (main) floor usually sat well above grade. Approached via an exterior staircase, the first floor housed the offices most frequently used by the public: the county clerk, register of deeds, treasurer, engineer, and elected commissioners.

The second floor held the circuit courtroom (and sometimes, a probate courtroom), judge's office, jury room, and the sheriff and county attorney's offices. The courtroom was usually opposite the central grand staircase rising from the building's primary entrance. Of grand proportions, the courtroom often was one-and-a-half or two stories in height.

The third story historically housed the county jail. The ornamentation of the cornice, parapet, and/or balustrades



The original floor plans of the Cheyenne County courthouse are representative of courthouse design in the early twentieth century.

along the roofline hid the jail windows. Three excellent examples of the exterior design treatments that disguised the third-floor jail function are the 1907 Richardsonian Romanesque courthouse in Osborne County, the 1924 Classical Revival courthouse in Cheyenne County, and the 1939-1940 Art Deco courthouse in Republic County.

End of an Era

The impending end of World War II stimulated the Kansas legislature to approve enabling laws to meet the pent-up need for new public facilities. By 1945, twenty-one counties passed special building fund levies for courthouses and jails.¹⁴ The decade that followed was the greatest period in construction of county buildings since the turn of the century.¹⁵

Constructed for utility and featuring the “structural expressionism” of the Post-World War II American Modern Movement, these buildings reflect a noticeable absence of historical architectural references.¹⁶ They not only departed from the second- and third-generation courthouses built in the early twentieth centuries in their exterior design, they also had a different allocation of interior spaces.

Changes in the role of local government and technological improvements in post-World War II Kansas rendered the traditional county courthouse obsolete. Improved road systems reduced the time necessary to travel to the county seat, and the facilities created to accommodate the needs of rural families disappeared. The advent of central heating and air conditioning made high ceilings, large windows, and broad, open stairways unnecessary. Eventually movies, radio, and television replaced trials and court sessions as popular forms of entertainment; as a result, courtrooms were smaller. The traditional location of courtrooms and jails on the upper floors with no elevator service created accessibility issues for the aged and disabled. Security issues and the growth in inmate population further challenged the county jail’s traditional location on the upper floor of the courthouse.¹⁷

At the same time, urban and suburban growth increased the size of adminis-

Courthouse Booklet Still Available for Purchase

In 1981, staff of the Historic Preservation Office prepared a 70-page booklet entitled Legacies: Kansas’ Older County Courthouses. The publication featured two sections of photographs by Dave Johnson, then an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Kansas; an essay on courthouses by Julie Wortman, then the architectural historian in the preservation office; and an introduction by the late Paul E. Wilson, then Kane Professor of Law at the University of Kansas.

The publication was the result of a two-year summer project conducted by staff of the preservation office. The booklet contains many photographs of the state’s courthouses, including architectural details that often go unnoticed, as well as human interest views of the people who work and do business in them.

A number of 1982 reprints are still available for \$3 each (plus tax and shipping) from the Museum Store, Kansas State Historical Society, 6425 S.W. Sixth Avenue, Topeka, KS 66615-1099; (785) 272-8681 Ext. 413. By mid- to late-August mechanisms should be in place to enable customers to make online purchases at www.kshs.org/store.

trative agencies of county government. The growing demand for expanded social and governmental services and the need for new equipment brought about by technological change required new or expanded facilities.

As a result, designers of the post-war county courthouse abandoned traditional courthouse plans. In 1958, the *Kansas Government Journal* assessed the state’s newest courthouses, finding that they were “much like any other modern office building.”¹⁸ The traditional features and materials that made the courthouse a visible monument and distinguished it from commercial or institutional buildings disappeared. Even the site changed. Off-street parking for employees and the public replaced the traditional spacious courthouse lawn. The county jail and sheriff’s offices, more often than not, now were in adjacent facilities that were part of a municipal/county complex.

On the inside, interrelated work tasks and new equipment defined the arrangement of spaces. Large, well-illuminated workrooms for records replaced airless vaults. The grand exterior stairway and vast open axial hall disappeared. Elevators provided access to expanded non-judicial agencies located on the upper floors.¹⁹

What the post-World War II county courthouse did share with its nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors was an economical, functional, up-to-date design. Each of the remaining seventy-five courthouses in Kansas constructed before World War II reflects designs intended to facilitate the efficient conduct of county business. (Note that five of the seventy-five have been replaced by new county courthouses and are now used for other purposes.) The thirty-five county courthouses erected after 1941 reflect the same goals. All represent the ideal of modernity for their time.

End Notes

¹ The courthouses dating from 1900-1930 in Anderson, Clay, Doniphan, Douglas, Harper, Kingman, Lincoln, Marion, Mitchell, Reno, and Thomas counties were previously listed on the National Register.

² Julia A. Wortman and David P. Johnson, *Legacies: Kansas’ Older County Courthouses* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1981), 19, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 24, referring to the 1911 Leavenworth County Courthouse.

⁴ Thomas W. Williamson, “The Evolution of Courthouse Building in Kansas,” *Kansas Government Journal* (June 1946). Vertical File. Kansas State Historical Society.

⁵ Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to American Architecture* (New York: Times Mirror New American Library, 1980), 194.

⁶ Albert J. Larson, “From Vernacular Through High-Style: The Ubiquitous American County Courthouse,” *Purposes in Built Form & Cultural Research. Proceedings of the 1986 International Conference on Built Form & Cultural Research: Purposes in Understanding Socio-cultural Aspects of Built Environments, November 1986, at the University of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 58.

⁷ Williamson, 25.

⁸ Rifkind, 218.

⁹ Larson, 58.

¹⁰ Wortman and Johnson, 53.

¹¹ Rifkind, 218.

¹² Jorbe Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1951), 136-137; Larson, 58-59; and Wortman and Johnson, 33.

¹³ Wortman and Johnson, 26.

¹⁴ “Kansas Courthouses,” *Kansas Government Journal*, June 1946, 12. Vertical File. Kansas State Historical Society.

¹⁵ “Modernistic Trend Replaces Ornate in New Courthouse Buildings,” *Kansas Government Journal*. n.d. Vertical File. Kansas State Historical Society. 446.

¹⁶ Larson, 59.

¹⁷ Wortman and Johnson, 2-3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

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